

JONATHAN TRAVELSTEAD

FIFTY-TWO HERTZ

Imagine roaming the world's largest ocean year after year alone, calling out with the regularity of a metronome, and hearing no response... [the animal is saying,] "I'm out here"... "[but] nobody is phoning home."

—Andrew C. Revkin, New York Times

Marine biologists listen
through their underwater instruments
to this solitary baleen whale
and name her for her song's
unique frequency,
an exhausted cry no other whales can hear.

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So we call her June,
give her a human name,
claim her as if we could erase her loneliness
the way we erase our own:

erecting antennae, slinging radio waves
like ships that sail beyond the script
on the map's border that reads
here be dragons,

hoping a postcard with a bit of code that says

You are

comes lobbing back to our wide, gray dishes.

Does not.

So we call ourselves billions
 of ones and zeroes
exiting a hole,
falling from a scarp's blasted entrance
to slate-bruised knees
 where we pray for a story
we can believe.

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Or we pray for rain to fall as snakes
 that bite their tails in prairie grass
and roll to the horizon

 where dust-browned leaves rise in a conjured gale.

Or we pray for tufts of nebulae
 that shake glimmering dust from their locks,
christen our foreheads with soot.

Holding out for a switch flicked in the heavens,
we pray for confirmation.

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June, what if your song returns from a distant place?

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An alien haunted my bedside as a child.
Its almond head,
the ink-black ovals that passed for its eyes
paralyzed
me in them,
one brackwater finger
held to its subtraction-sign mouth
took from me the knowledge I was alone.

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June, let us each come forward
and join the swelling solitudes.
Let us commune
in this dark's first burning breath
and experience
the stars' frequencies
individual in light and sound,
each unique as the fingerprint's gentle sine
shining their celestial voices down on us.
May we not refuse their beauty
which says
I see you. I name you.